

# Making Friends

*by Lilian G. Katz*

Being able to make friends and get along with other children during childhood has important far-reaching consequences in later life. Many specialists studying the long-term development of social competence claim that if valuable peer-relations skills are not developed early, social adjustment problems may arise later during adolescence and adulthood.

These dire warnings do not suggest that all young children must become social butterflies. It is important for all children to be able to work, play, or just be alone contentedly some of the time. But a child who is alone because she cannot engage in satisfying interaction with other children should be helped to learn how to do so.

## The Art of Making Friends

Though making friends seems to come naturally to most children, it requires a good deal of experience and usually involves lots of trial and error. Observations of children successful in making friends indicate that they use such skills as giving appropriate responses to their own actions or the actions of others, like "excuse me" or "thanks a lot." They also make positive suggestions to others, offer to help and to contribute to others' activities, use phrases that encourage an exchange of information, like "you know what?" and readily respond in turn with "No! What?"

They are likely to express their desires clearly, to request information from others about their intentions and wishes, to refrain from calling attention to themselves, and to enter ongoing conversations on, rather than off, the current topic. They also seem to know how to establish mutual interests by exploring ways in which they are similar to other children: likes, experiences, or characteristics they and their peers have in common.

## The Parents' Role

Recent research suggests that parents have an important role in helping develop and refine their

children's friendship-making skills. As it is in many other aspects of children's development, having warm, supportive, and encouraging parents to which the child feels deeply, securely, and affectionately attached seems to be basic to the development of social competence. Not surprisingly, there is ample reason to believe that parents' own reactions with their friends provide the young child with models and cues about the skills involved.

Parents' behavior indicates to their children the value the parents place on friendships. It also lets children know that their parents are concerned with the feelings of others. Parents can help children by asking from time to time about the feelings of their children's close friend—simple questions like "how does Sally feel about...[a favorite game or a school outing]?" Parents also play a role when they help their children interpret their friends' feelings, and when they teach them to resist jumping to premature conclusions interpreting their friends' behavior. Parents can also provide a model that shows children how to respect someone with whom they disagree. Respecting someone we agree with is easy by contrast.

## Provide Lots of Opportunities

Some activities are more conducive to the development of social skills than others—a youngster is far more likely to be in a position to test his social skills at the neighborhood playground than at home with a box full of toys. Opportunities for spontaneous, unstructured play among young children under the supervision of a knowledgeable adult are essential. Many children who have difficulty making friends become excluded from social activities, and thus have less experience and fewer opportunities to develop, learn, practice, and refine the skills they lack. It takes seven or eight years to develop and refine the wide range of skills required for friendship making and keeping. Thus it is a good idea to start early in providing a child with lots of warmth and support, and with frequent opportunities to make and keep friends.